

Americans See Negative Consequences of US Troop Withdrawal from South Korea

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As the 2024 presidential election nears, the American public is being offered two clear paths forward on the US alliance system. Vice President Kamala Harris has indicated that under her administration it would be business as usual. Allies would remain a key pillar of US foreign policy just as they have for the past 70 years. Former President Donald Trump, however, presents a starkly different path.

In his first term, Trump upended decades of US foreign policy orthodoxy by calling into question the US commitment to defend its allies around the world. One of his primary focuses was South Korea, threatening to withdraw US troops unless there was a massive increase in South Korea's contribution to a cost-sharing agreement. He also openly mused that US allies should have their own nuclear weapons. With Trump once again a candidate, the 2024 Chicago Council Survey put those sentiments to the American public and found that it favors the close traditional relationship with South Korea.

Key Findings

- Seven in 10 (69%) say the US security relationship with South Korea does more to strengthen US national security than it does to weaken it (26%).
- Two-thirds of Americans (63%) support long-term US military bases in South Korea.
- If US troops were withdrawn from South Korea, Americans say it would have a negative impact on US security (51%), South Korea's security (67%), security in the Asia-Pacific (65%), and the alliance between the United States and South Korea (62%).

- Half of Americans (51%) favor using US troops to defend South Korea if North Korea invaded.
- Four in 10 (43%) support accepting North Korea as a nuclear state and entering arms control discussions with North Korea's leadership.

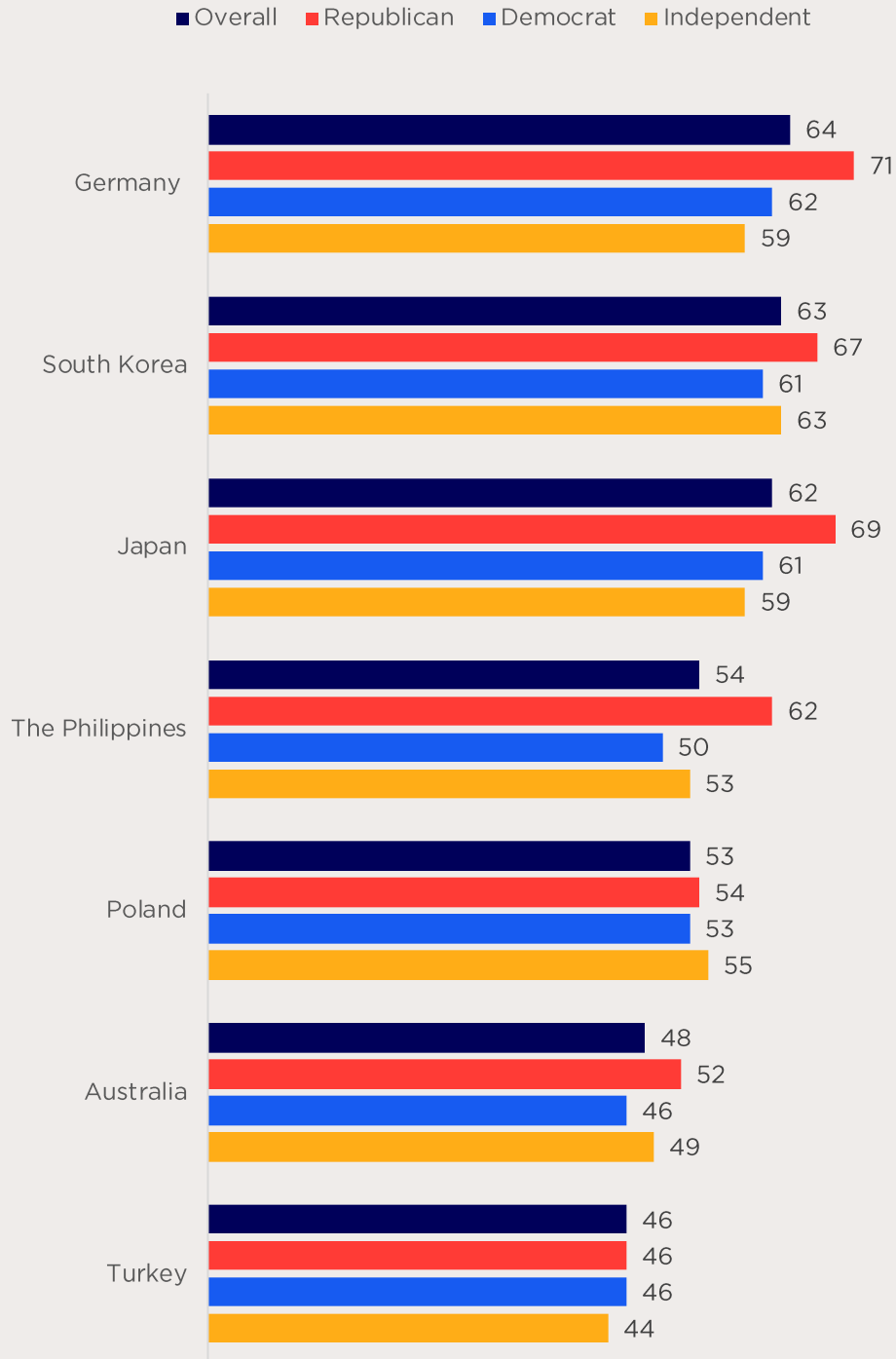
Americans Say South Korea Does More to Strengthen US National Security, Oppose Troop Withdrawal

The United States currently stations roughly 28,500 soldiers in South Korea. Maintaining those long-term bases garners strong support from the American public. Roughly two-thirds of Americans (63%) say the United States should have long-term bases in South Korea, on par with Germany (64%) and Japan (62%). Majorities have supported bases in South Korea since the question was first asked in 2002, ranging from a high of 74 percent in 2018 to a low of 60 percent in 2010 and 2012. That support has always been strongly bipartisan.¹

¹ See appendix for full partisan trend results.

Support for US Military Bases Abroad

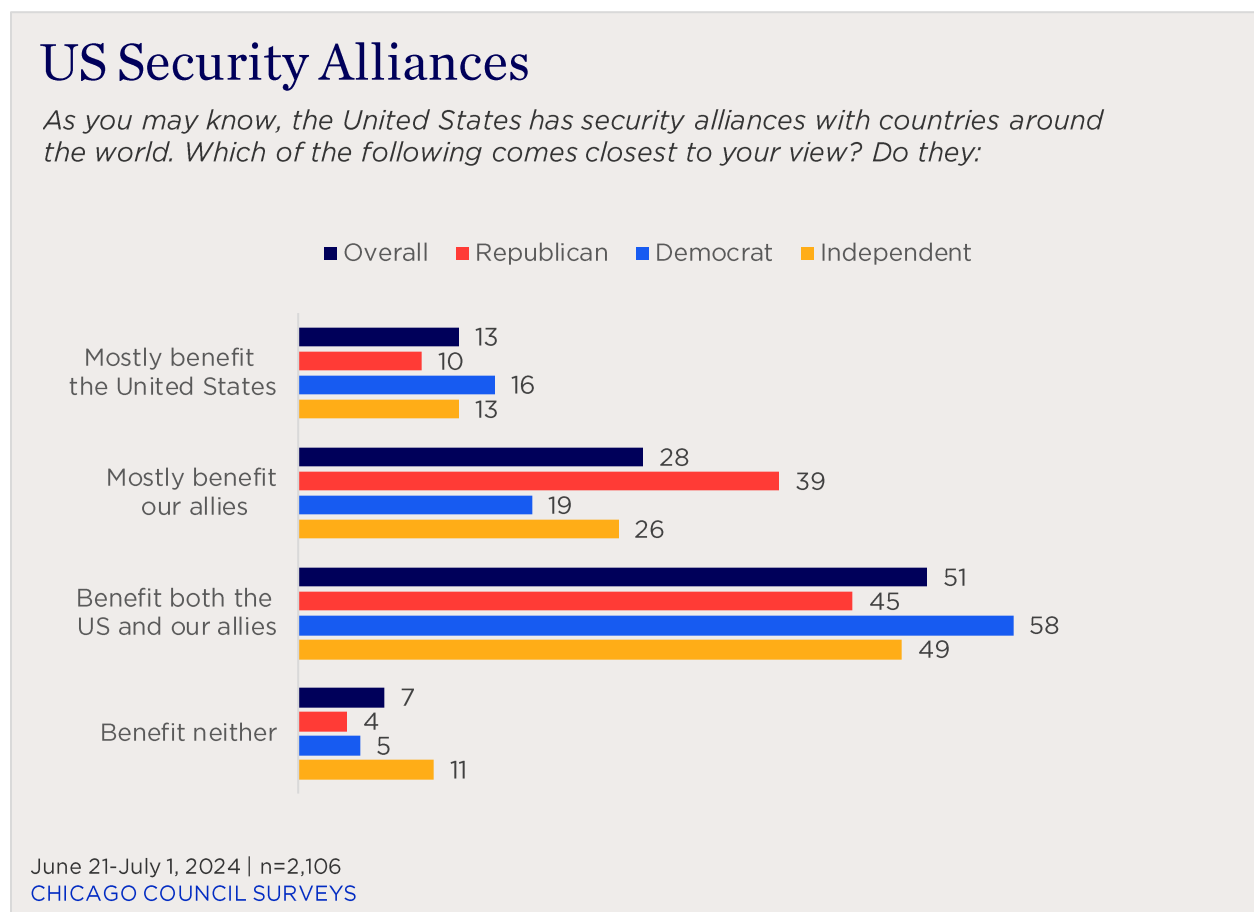
Do you think the United States should or should not have long-term military bases in the following places? (% should have)



June 21-July 1, 2024 | n=1,063
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Trump, however, has [repeatedly called](#) for the removal of US troops from South Korea. He claims that South Korea does not pay its fair share for the stationing of US troops and should ultimately be responsible for its own defense.² The American public rejects this view that alliances are not worth costs the United States pays to maintain them. But a substantial subset of Republicans are concerned about the related costs.

When asked about the costs and benefits of alliances, a majority of Americans (64% combined) say US security alliances benefit both the United States and our allies (51%) or mostly benefit the United States (13%). Among Republicans, a majority (55% combined) see US alliances as benefitting both the United States and its allies (45%) or primarily benefitting the United States (10%).

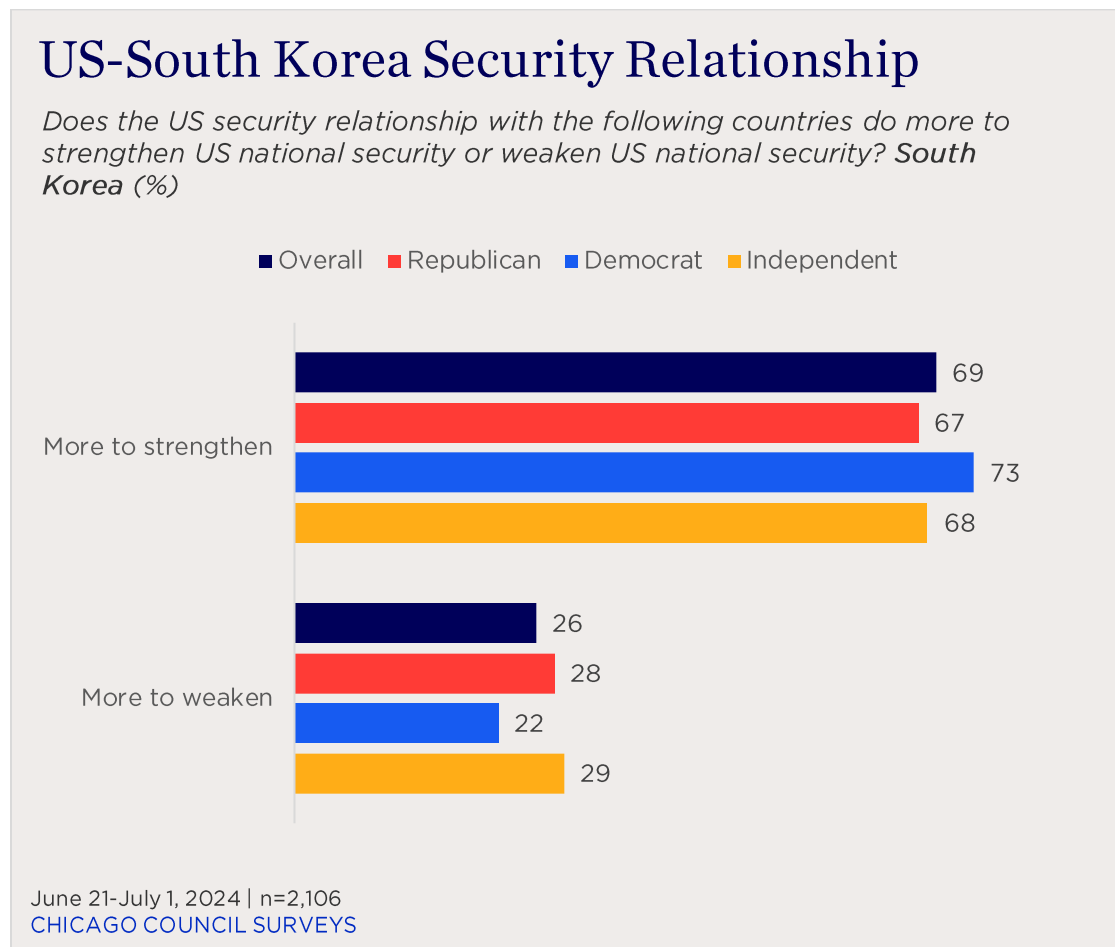


However, a significant portion of Republicans (43% combined) say these alliances mostly benefit US allies (39%) or benefit neither country (4%). Among this group, concerns about costs appear to be a motivating factor: 64

² South Korea [currently contributes](#) \$1 billion to support the stationing of US troops in South Korea, and in 2022 it had the [ninth-largest](#) defense budget in the world, spending [2.7 percent of GDP](#) on defense.

percent say allies do not pay their fair share, and 46 percent think allies increase the cost of defense for the United States.

Even among this limited group of Republicans focused on the costs associated with alliances—just 183 respondents in total out of 2,106—a majority (62%) say the relationship with South Korea does more to strengthen US national security compared to 33 percent who say it does more to weaken US national security. This is only somewhat lower than the American public overall, where 69 percent say the security relationship with South Korea does more to strengthen—versus 26 percent weaken—US national security.



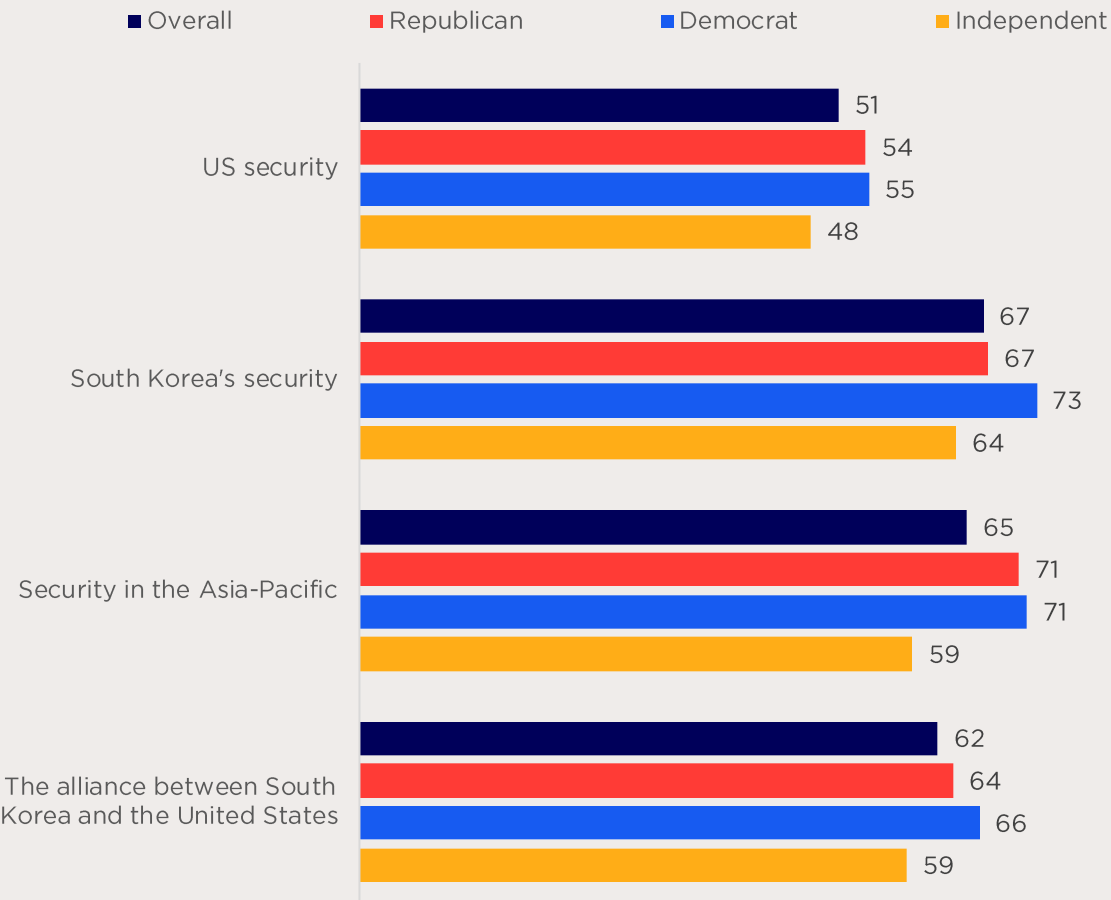
These positive views on the role that South Korea plays in US national security likely influence the public’s perception that withdrawing US troops from South Korea would negatively impact a range of security issues.

In an August 2024 Council-Ipsos poll, half of Americans (51%) said they think withdrawing US troops from South Korea would negatively impact US security, 67 percent say it would negatively impact South Korea’s security, and 65 percent say it would negatively impact security in the Asia-Pacific. As

for the US alliance with South Korea, 62 percent believe withdrawing US troops would have a negative impact.³ Importantly, these views are consistent across partisan groups, with Republicans and Democrats in close agreement on the potential consequences of pulling US troops from South Korea.

Perceived Impact of US Troop Withdrawal

Some US politicians have discussed withdrawing US troops from South Korea. If the United States withdraws its 28,500 troops from South Korea, what impact will this have on:
Negative impact (%)



August 2-4, 2024 | n=1,024
 CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS / IPSOS

Americans Unsure about a Nuclear Ally

The possibility of troop withdrawal under a second Trump administration has sparked serious discussions in Seoul about the steps South Korea would take in the event of a full US troop withdrawal. The most serious aspect of those

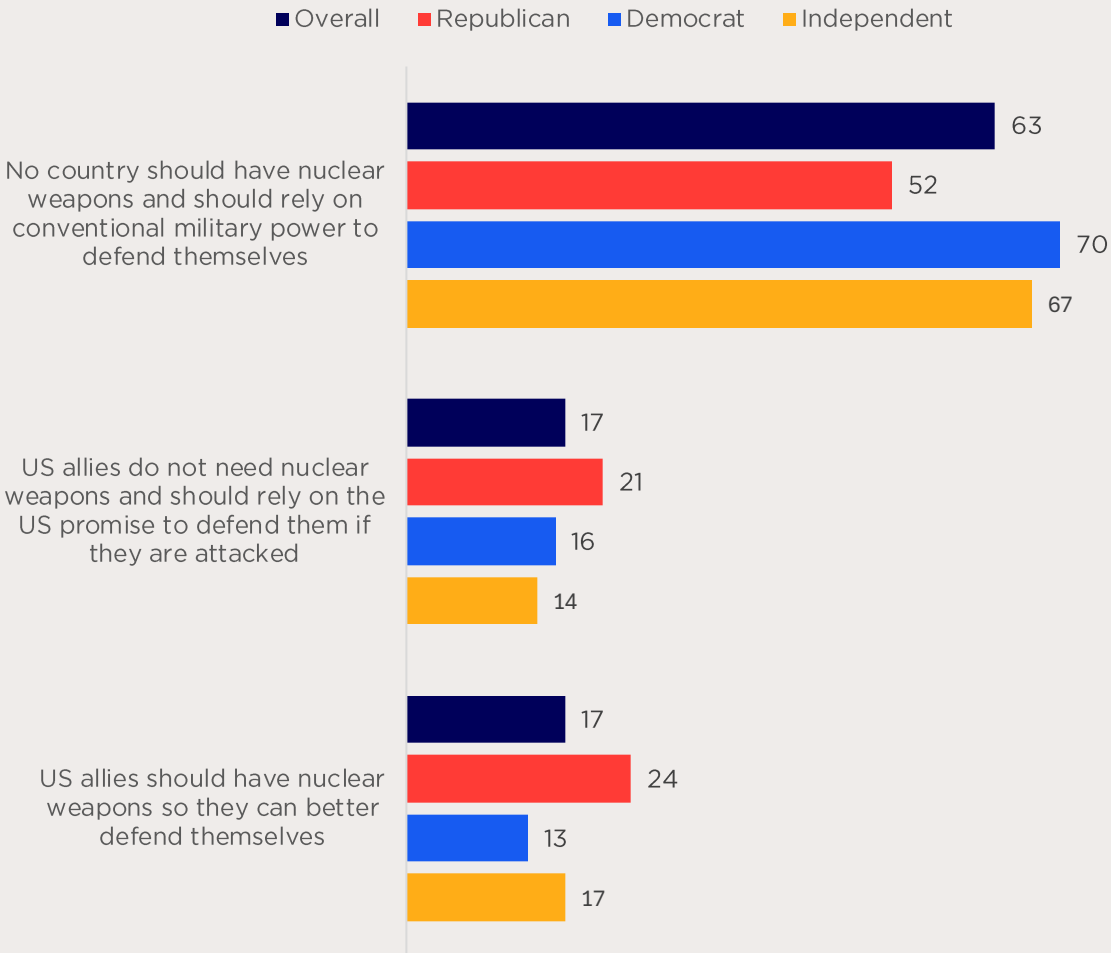
³ For details on this August survey, please see the methodology section at the end of this report.

discussions has been the [potential](#) for South Korea to develop an indigenous nuclear weapons program. Polling in South Korea—including [a survey](#) conducted by the Council in South Korea in 2022—has [consistently](#) found two-thirds of South Koreans support an indigenous nuclear weapons program.

The American public, however, is difficult to read on how it would react to an American ally developing nuclear weapons. In the August Council-Ipsos poll, two-thirds of the American public (63%) thinks no country should have nuclear weapons and should rely on conventional military power to defend themselves. That, of course, may be the ideal but is not the world as it currently exists. When it comes to allies developing nuclear weapons, Americans are evenly split. While 17 percent say US allies should have nuclear weapons to better defend themselves, 16 percent say US allies do not need nuclear weapons and should rely on the US promise to defend them if they are attacked.

Views on US Allies Having Nuclear Weapons

Some people say US allies should have nuclear weapons so they can better defend themselves. Others say it is better to limit the spread of nuclear weapons around the world no matter the country. Which is closer to your view? (%)

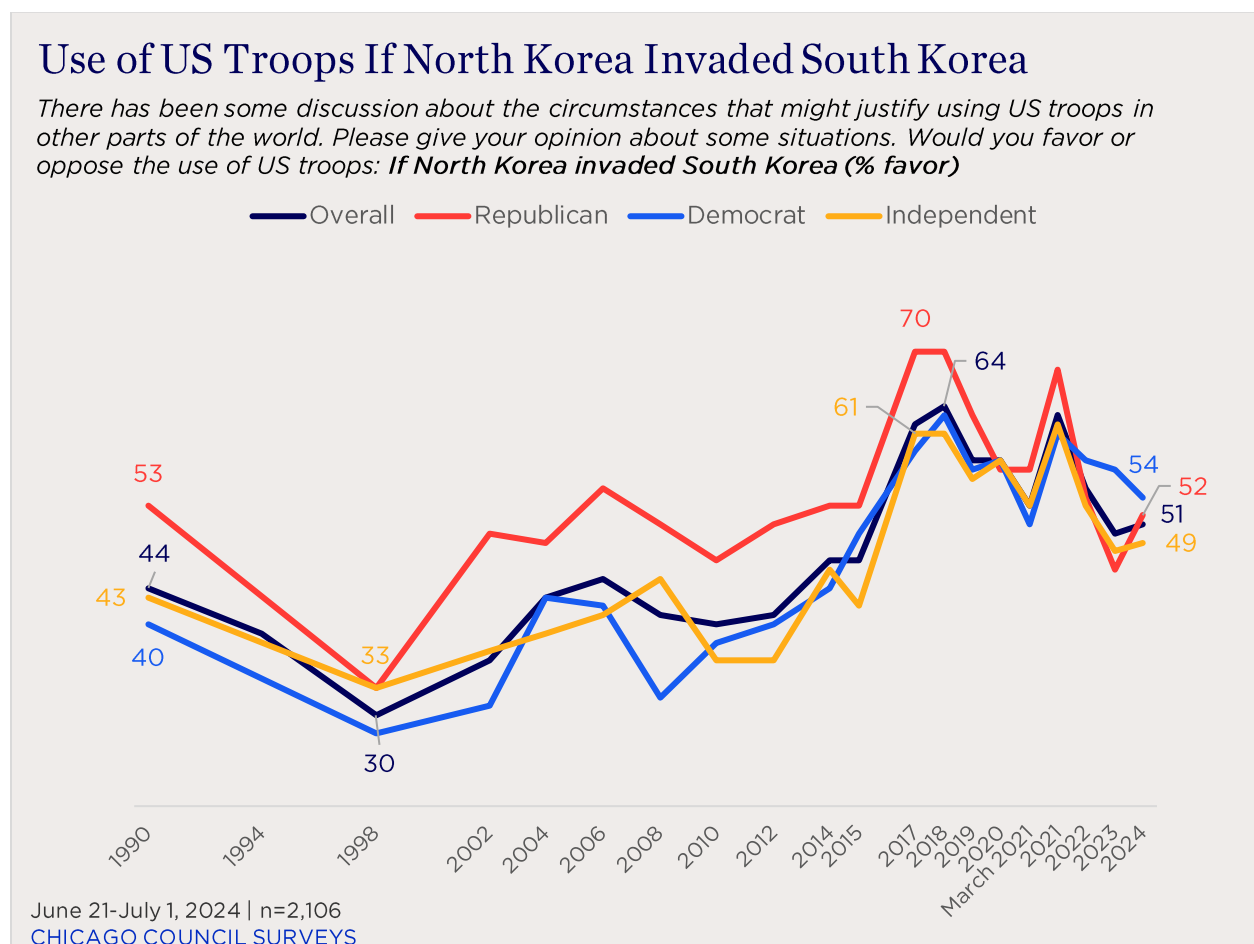


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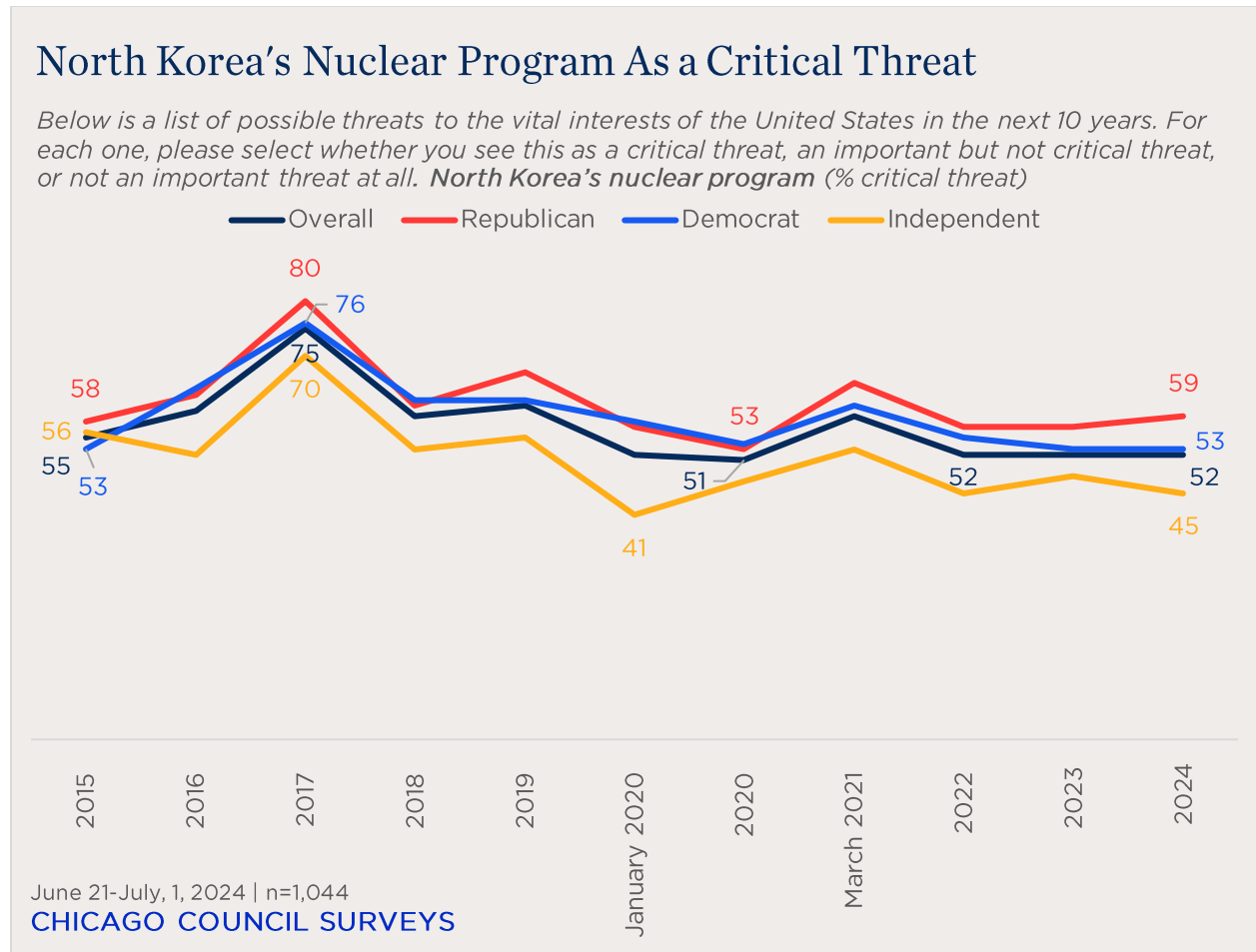
How these numbers might shift if an ally took steps to pursue a nuclear weapons program is impossible to predict. However, in a [survey conducted in 2021](#), Americans were asked directly if the United States should try to prevent or allow South Korea to pursue its own nuclear weapons program. At that time, 63 percent of Americans, 60 percent of Republicans, and 65 percent of Democrats agreed that the United States should try to prevent South Korea from pursuing such a program.

Potential North Korea Fatigue

Americans' opposition to a South Korean nuclear capability may be due in part to the fact that a majority of the American public (51%) continues to favor the use of US troops to defend South Korea if North Korea invaded. This includes half of Republicans (52%) and Democrats (54%). While this is down from the previous high of 64 percent in 2018, this decline is most likely a recalibration of the threat from North Korea while living amid the current conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. North Korea's missile launches and threats now appear to receive less attention in the US media, and North Korea's nuclear program is considered less of a threat now than in 2017. Moreover, [in 2022](#), half of the American public (51%) said the United States had to learn to live with countries like North Korea and Iran possessing nuclear weapons, just as the United States does with China and Russia.

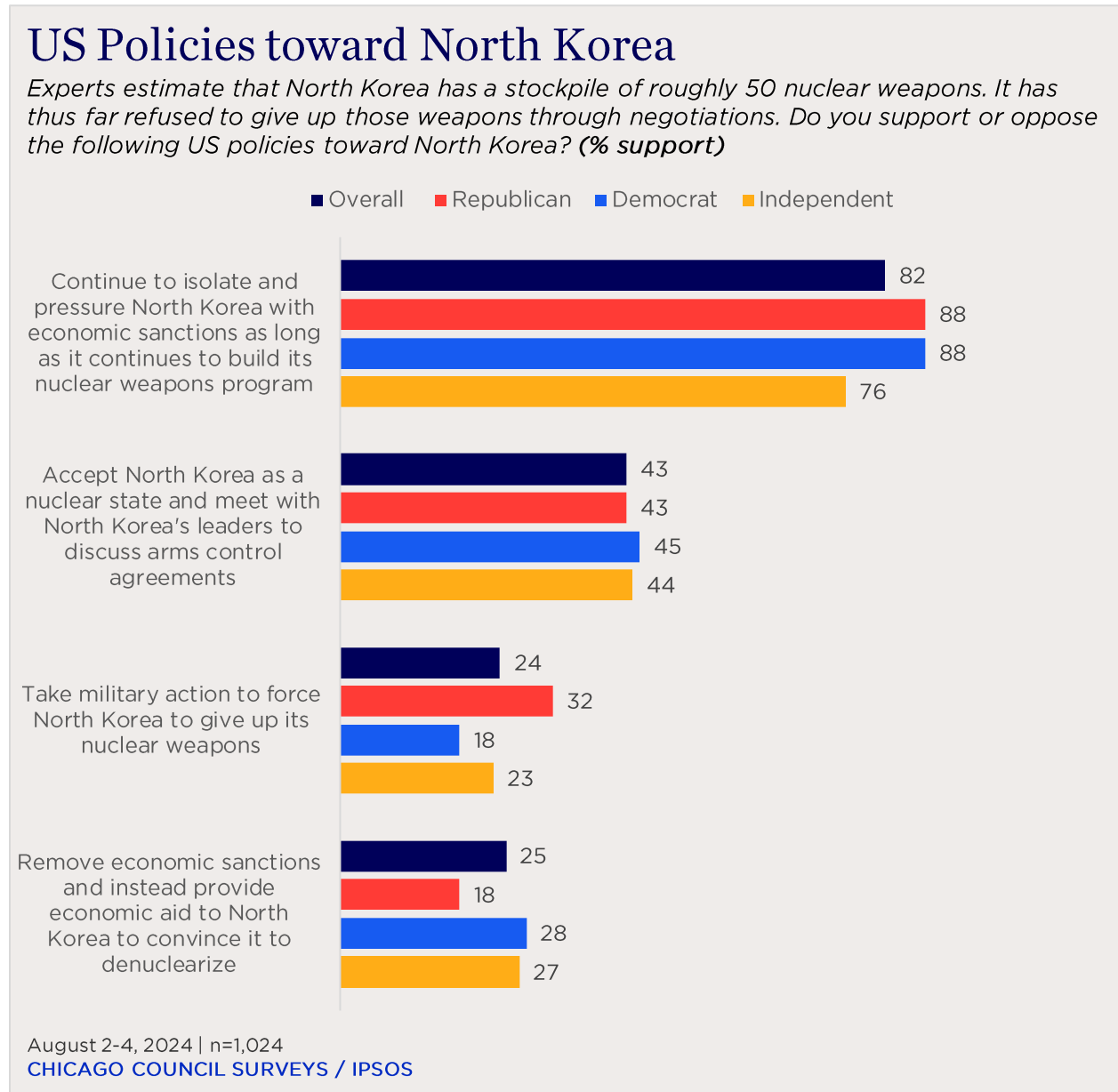


In terms of dealing with North Korea, the Biden administration has put the challenge on the backburner as wars in Ukraine and the Middle East dominate the foreign policy discussion. There is also no great push from the American public to deal with the challenge urgently. Half of Americans (52%) cite North Korea's nuclear program as a critical threat. This places it middle of the pack among potential threats, roughly the same as international terrorism (53% critical), Iran's nuclear program (53% critical), and Russia's territorial ambitions (50%). Each of these trail the top threat of weakening democracy in the United States (67% critical).



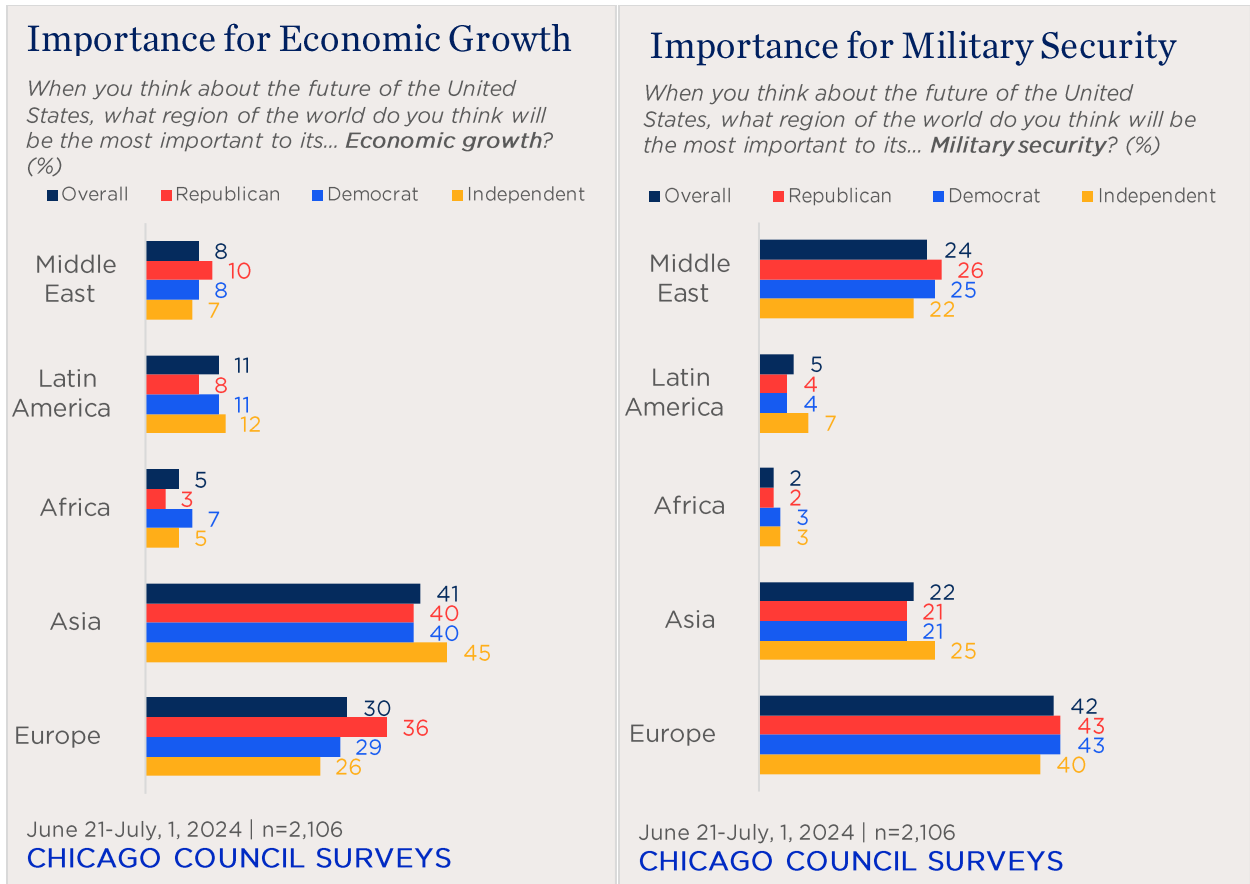
But there is also the question of what is to be done about North Korea's nuclear weapons program—a challenge with notoriously few good options. A majority of Americans (82%) favor continuing to isolate and pressure North Korea with economic sanctions. This has been the basic approach across multiple presidential administrations for the past 20 years to no avail. It is likely also seen as relatively cost free. One-quarter (24%) of Americans support taking military action to force North Korea to denuclearize. An August Council-Ipsos poll additionally asked whether to accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state and meet North Korea's leaders to discuss arms

control agreements. Roughly four in 10 Americans support this approach (43%, 51% oppose).



Favorable Views of South Korea Remain at All-Time High

Even as successive US presidential administrations have given greater importance to the security dimensions of US foreign policy in Asia, the American public has yet to follow. A plurality (41%) say Asia is most important for future US economic growth, but just 22 percent cite its importance for future US military security.

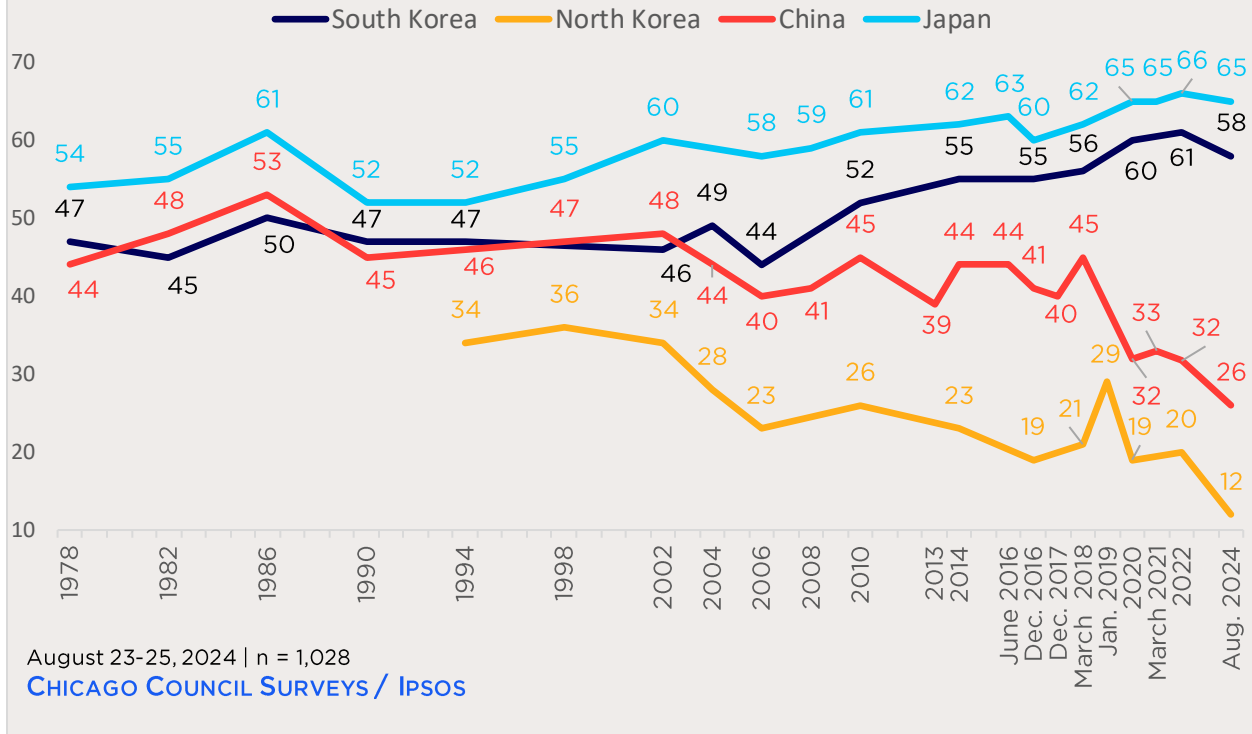


Of course, South Korea is an increasingly important actor in the region given its economic and military power. However, Americans are not yet ready to place it in the top tier of influential countries there. The August Council-Ipsos poll finds that on a zero to 10 scale—where zero represents not influential at all and 10 is very influential—South Korea receives a score of 5.9. This puts it even with Russia (6.0) but below Japan (7.0), the United States (7.0), and China (7.9), but above Taiwan (5.1) and North Korea (4.7).

While Americans may not see South Korea as one of the most influential countries in the region, South Korea does remain one of the most favored countries among Americans in the region. In the August Council-Ipsos poll, South Korea’s favorability is 58 on a 0-100 scale, where 0 represents very unfavorable feelings and 100 is very favorable feelings. Of the Asian countries asked about, only Japan (65) is viewed more favorably among Americans. By contrast, China receives a 26 and North Korea just an 12, being the least favorably viewed country among Americans.

Feeling Thermometer

Please rate your feelings toward some countries, with one hundred meaning a very warm, favorable feeling, zero meaning a very cold, unfavorable feeling, and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold. You can use any number from zero to one hundred, the higher the number the more favorable your feelings are toward that country. (mean)



Conclusion

The 2024 US presidential election could prove to be a critical turning point in US foreign relations. Should Trump win a second term, the departure from US foreign policy orthodoxy that follows could drastically alter the security landscape as currently configured. This could include profound changes to the US-South Korea alliance. But this would not be done at the behest of the American public. Americans overall understand the importance of South Korea to US national security, remain committed to defending South Korea if North Korea invaded, and continue to rate South Korea as one of the most favorable countries in Asia. The question is whether that will be enough to halt the potential challenges facing a 70-year alliance.

Methodology

This analysis is based on data from the 2024 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US

Foreign Policy. The 2024 Chicago Council Survey was conducted June 21–July 1, 2024, by Ipsos using its large-scale nationwide online research panel, KnowledgePanel, in both English and Spanish among a weighted national sample of 2,106 adults 18 or older living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is ± 2.3 percentage points, including a design effect of 1.1229. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups or for partial-sample items.

Additional data comes from two joint Chicago Council on Global Affairs–Ipsos surveys.

The first was conducted August 2–4, 2024, by Ipsos using its large-scale, nationwide, online research panel, KnowledgePanel, among a weighted national sample of 1,024 adults 18 or older living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is ± 3.2 percentage points, including a design effect of 1.06.

The second was conducted August 23–25, 2024, by Ipsos using its large-scale, nationwide, online research panel, KnowledgePanel, among a weighted national sample of 1,028 adults 18 or older living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is ± 3.2 percentage points, including a design effect of 1.11.

Partisan identification is based on how respondents answered a standard partisan self-identification question: “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?”

The 2024 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the Crown family, the Korea Foundation, and the United States-Japan Foundation.

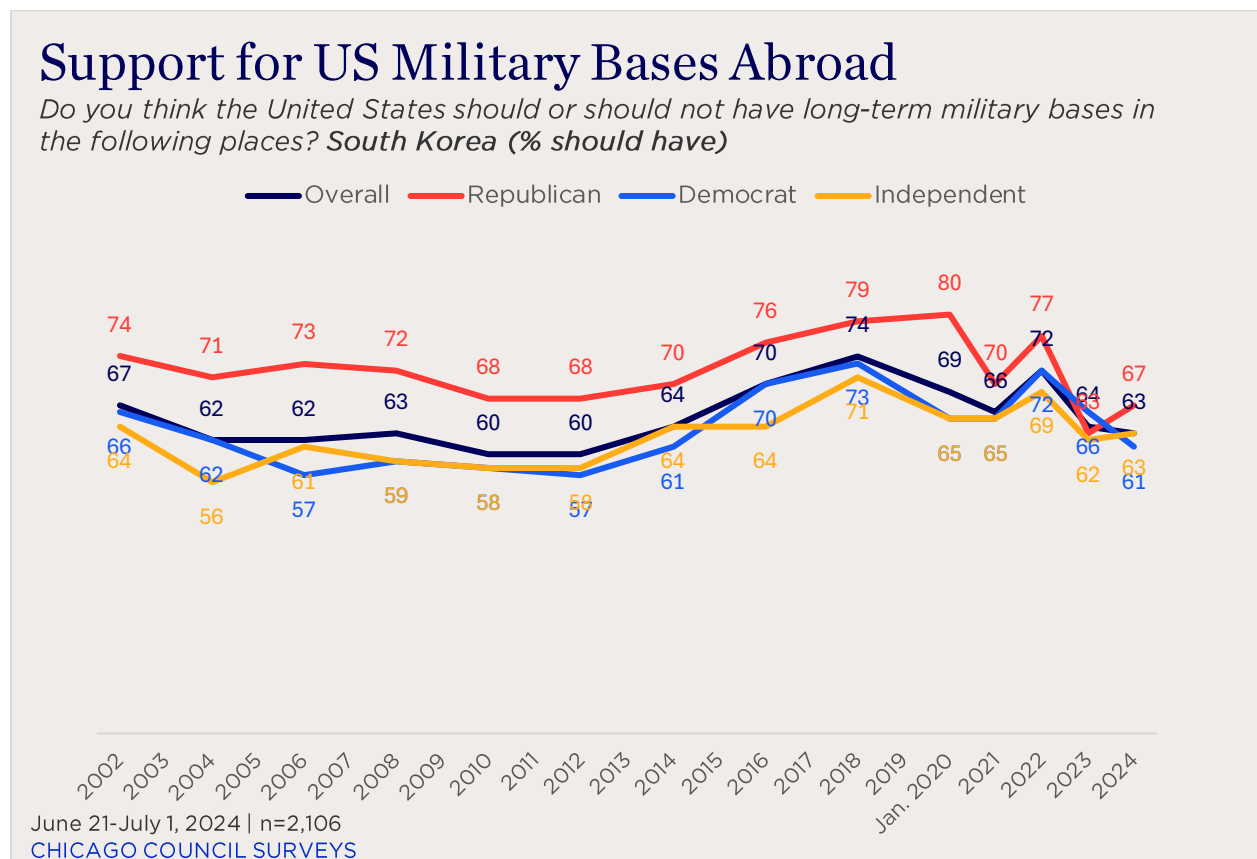
[About the Chicago Council on Global Affairs](#)

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization that provides insight—and influences the public discourse—on critical global issues. We convene leading global voices, conduct independent research, and engage the public to explore ideas that will shape our global future. The Council is committed to bringing clarity and offering solutions to issues that transcend borders and transform how people, business, and governments engage the world. Learn more at thechicagocouncil.org and follow [@ChicagoCouncil](https://twitter.com/ChicagoCouncil).

[About the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy](#)

Established in 2018 with a transformative gift from the Crown Family, the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy is driven by the belief that the public plays a critical role in determining the direction of US foreign policy and that an informed and engaged public is critical for effective policymaking. The centerpiece of the Lester Crown Center is its annual survey of American public opinion and US foreign policy, the Chicago Council Survey, which has been conducted since 1974. For the latest research from the Crown Center, follow [@ChiCouncilFP](https://twitter.com/ChiCouncilFP).

Appendix



Question 40

Q40. Do you think the United States should or should not have long-term military bases in the following places?

Q40/3. South Korea (% should have)					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
2002	67	74	66	64	8
2004	62	71	62	56	9
2006	62	73	57	61	16

2008	63	72	59	59	13
2010	60	68	58	58	10
2012	60	68	57	58	11
2014	64	70	61	64	9
2016	70	76	70	64	6
2018	74	79	73	71	6
January 2020	69	80	65	65	15
2021 Trilateral	66	70	65	65	5
2022	72	77	72	69	5
2023	64	63	66	62	-3
2024	63	67	61	63	6

Question 5

Q5. Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interests of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all.

Q5/29. North Korea's nuclear program (% critical threat)					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
2015	55	58	53	56	5
2016	60	63	64	52	-1
2017	75	80	76	70	4
2018	59	61	62	53	-1
2019	61	67	62	55	5
January 2020	52	57	58	41	-1
2020	51	53	54	47	-1
March 2021	60	65	61	55	4
2022	52	57	55	45	2
2023	52	57	53	48	4
2024	52	59	53	45	6

Summary of Q5 – 2024 data only

Q5. Potential Threats to the United States (% critical threat)					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
Q5/6a. Large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the U.S.	50	83	27	45	56
Q5/8a. Climate change	47	17	72	48	-55
Q5/10. International Terrorism	53	65	51	43	14
Q5/29. North Korea's nuclear program	52	59	53	45	6
Q5/15. Iran's nuclear program	53	62	52	45	10
Q5/20. Lack of a peace agreement between	31	27	39	26	-12

Israel and the Palestinians					
Q5/20B. The war between Israel and Hamas escalating into a wider war in the Middle East	41	42	49	34	-7
Q5/38b. Weakening democracy in the United States	67	62	75	64	-13
Q5/38. The decline of democracy around the world	54	44	68	48	-24
Q5/21. Russia's territorial ambitions	50	48	60	42	-12
Q5/45. China's territorial ambitions	48	61	49	36	12
Q5/45B. Economic competition from China	33	45	25	30	20
Q5/34C. Political violence around the 2024 election	49	33	65	47	-32
Q5/34b. Foreign interference in American elections	54	51	61	50	-10

Question 30

Q30. There has been some discussion about the circumstances that might justify using US troops in other parts of the world. Please give your opinion about some situations. Would you favor or oppose the use of US troops:

Q30/1. If North Korea invaded South Korea (% favor)					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
1990	44	53	40	43	13
1994	39	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1998	30	33	28	33	5
2002	36	50	31	37	19
2004	43	49	43	39	6
2006	45	55	42	41	13
2008	41	51	32	45	19
2010	40	47	38	36	9
2012	41	51	40	36	11
2014	47	53	44	46	9
2015	47	53	50	42	3
2017	62	70	59	61	11
2018	64	70	63	61	7
2019	58	63	57	56	6
2020	58	57	58	58	-1
March 2021	53	57	51	53	6
2021	63	68	61	62	7
2022	55	54	58	53	-4

2023	50	46	57	48	-11
2024	51	52	54	49	-2

Question 451S.

Q451S. Does the US security relationship with the following countries do more to strengthen US national security or weaken US national security?

More to strengthen (%)					
Q451S/5. South Korea					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
2023	71	67	78	68	-11
2024	69	67	73	68	-6
More to weaken (%)					
Q451S/5. South Korea					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
2023	25	30	18	27	12
2024	26	28	22	29	6